

April 1992

Book Review/ Stolen Words

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Recommended Citation

Fast, Barry and Gleason, Paul (1992) "Book Review/ Stolen Words," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 13.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1175>

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Book Reviews



Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism

Thomas Mallon.

New York: Penguin Books, 1991 (paperback; originally published in hardcover by Ticknor and Fields, 1989). xv+300 pages, indexed. \$9.95. ISBN 0-14-014440-4

Reviewed by **Paul Gleason**

S*Stolen Words* is both entertaining and informative. Thomas Mallon, a Lecturer in English at Vassar College, uses a series of thoroughly researched case studies—ranging from Laurence Sterne's borrowings in the writing of *Tristram Shandy* in the 1750's to allegations of theft from a historical novel by scriptwriters developing the TV series "Falcon Crest" in the early 1980's—to illuminate many aspects of plagiarism. By means of a vivid imagination and superior writing skill, he manages to give readers insights into why authors might have succumbed to the temptation to steal others' work, as well as to convey the drama inherent in allegations of plagiarism and the investigations that may result.

Mallon begins by explaining briefly that the concept of originality of an author's work gradually took hold beginning in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Before this time, authors were expected to imitate one another and had few scruples about borrowing from others, although the lifting of lengthy passages verbatim was frowned upon; after about 1700, however, the originality of an author's work was seen as essential and plagiarism was widely viewed as a serious offense.

Each of the four full-length case studies meander considerably, yet the author's ability to relate seemingly disparate subjects and to entertain with digressions, including some about how he carried out his research for the book, enables him to keep the reader interested—something that might have been very difficult to do had the studies been presented in straight line narrative form.

It is clear that the author had considerably more personal interest in two of the full-length studies—those of (1) nineteenth-century English author Charles Reade's theft of much of the plot, characters, and dialogue (in translation) of contemporary French author Madame Charles Reybaud's novelette, *Mademoiselle de Malpierre*, and (2) Texas Tech professor Jayme Sokolow's theft of, among other items, large portions of the doctoral dissertation of Stephen Nissenbaum, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst—than in the others—those of (1) U.S. novelist Jason Epstein's theft of numerous passages from English novelist Martin Amis's *The Rachel Papers* and (2) the Falcon Crest case (mentioned above), in which scriptwriter Earl Hamner was accused (and subsequently acquitted in court) of stealing portions of novelist Anita Clay Kornfeld's novel, *The Vintage Years*.

The study of Charles Reade is fascinating. He emerges as a well educated and highly intelligent, if arrogant and combative, man and a very able writer. He was a crusader against literary theft and copyright infringement who, at the same time, had such an appetite for public esteem of his work that he repeatedly plagiarized the works of others in the hope of winning it. Mallon explains that "he [Reade] can be explained in the algebra of most compulsions. He stole because he hated stealing and he hated stealing because he stole."

In the course of his research, Mallon visited the London Library to examine the notebooks Reade kept during much of his writing life.

He notes that the notebooks clearly incriminate Reade in the theft of Madame Reybaud's novelette, in his story entitled "The Picture," and implies that the notebooks were indexed and scrupulously taken care of by Reade "so as to make posterity's discovery of their incriminating memoranda inevitable." In this context, Mallon refers to an article by Peter Shaw in the Summer 1982 issue of the *American Scholar*, in which kleptomania is singled out as "the social crime that plagiarism most closely resembles" because of the plagiarist's "evident wish to be detected and in the circumstances that what is stolen may not be needed." These two earmarks of the confirmed plagiarist—as opposed to, say, a student who panics when a term paper is due and copies the bulk of the paper out of a published work without attribution—may also be clearly seen in Mallon's description of both the Sokolow and Epstein cases, as well as the shorter case study on the literary thefts carried out by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The account of the Sokolow case is also very good. Mallon did extensive interviews with the Texas Tech faculty members who learned of allegations of plagiarism against Jayme Sokolow, investigated them, and asked him (in the fall of 1981) to withdraw his request for tenure and to leave the university's history department—at the end of the academic year—after they found a pattern of plagiarism in his work going back at least as far as his doctoral thesis. Interestingly, though, neither the university nor the department ever published or otherwise disseminated its findings. Consequently, Sokolow

landed a job as a program officer with the National Endowment for the Humanities in which, among other things, he evaluated the proposals of various scholars applying for research grants. Professor Stephen Nissenbaum, whose work had been ripped off, looked to the American Historical Association to discipline Sokolow, but it administered no more than a wrist slap. In doing his research, Mallon commented, "the inability of the literary and academic worlds adequately to define, much less reasonably punish, instances of plagiarism was something I observed again and again."

An interesting and somewhat disturbing sidelight to this case is provided by Mallon's account of the handling by various university presses of a plagiarized manuscript submitted to them by Sokolow entitled *Eros and Modernization*. He first sent it, in January 1981 to Ohio State University Press, which sent it to the leading expert in the field, Professor Stephen Nissenbaum, re-

questing a review. Nissenbaum quickly informed the press that Sokolow had plagiarized his work, including parallel-column examples of various rather blatant infringements with his reply. The press—apparently fearful of scandal and/or a lawsuit by Sokolow—simply rejected the manuscript without mentioning Nissenbaum's allegations. Sokolow sent it out to another university press, which again sent it to Professor Nissenbaum for review; on learning of Nissenbaum's allegations, this press, too, quickly backed away and rejected the manuscript without taking any other action. A third university press that received Sokolow's manuscript followed suit. Two additional university presses then rejected the manuscript without having any direct contact with Professor Nissenbaum before Fairleigh Dickinson University Press agreed to publish the book, which it did in October 1983.

Thomas Mallon observes that "almost all of us—writers, common readers, academics—prefer gossip about plagiarism to real inquiry; in fact, we usually show such distaste for its investigation that the taint of small mindedness can hang over even the most considered accusation." He concludes by suggesting that in order to punish plagiarism, "the sanction most feasible and most just is the ironic one: publication. Get the word out on the persistent offender"

Stolen Words is an uncompromising book that readers are likely to find stimulating and worthwhile.

Paul Gleason is an Assistant Editor with the International Monetary Fund (Washington, DC). The views expressed in this review are those of the author and should not be interpreted as those of the IMF. ☞



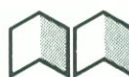
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